

Chapter 12: Sport psychology

by **Sandy Gordon**

Psychological skills training is an important area for coaches and athletes to develop competence in. While much of the coach's time is spent in developing physical, technical and tactical components of an athlete's performance, psychological skills contribute greatly to overall athlete performance. Coaches need to ensure that they spend time with their athletes to develop a range of mental skills to assist performance.

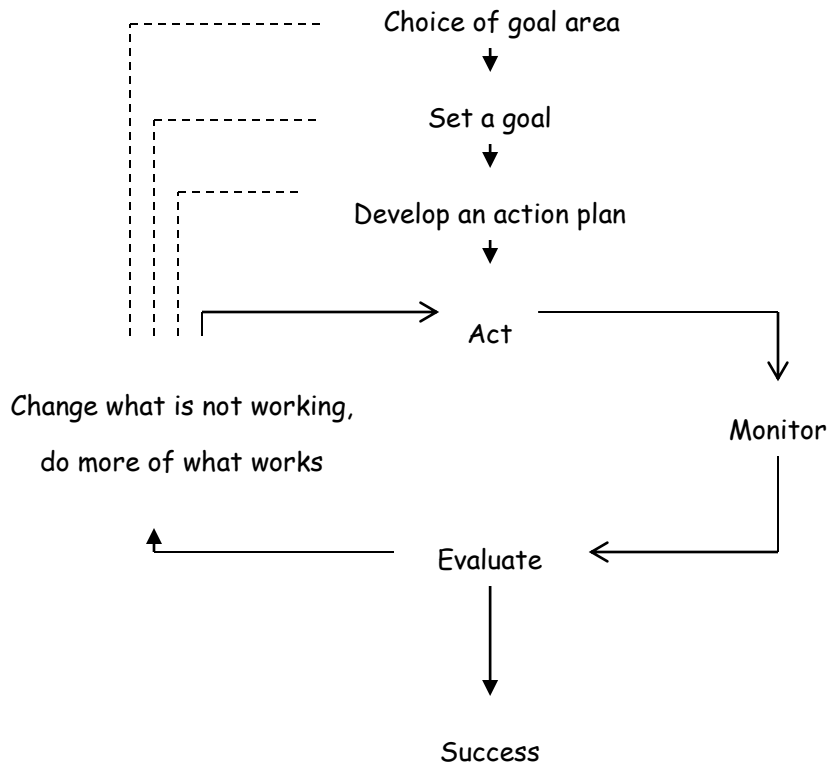
As well as providing information for coaches on mental skills training to bring out the best in athletes, this chapter illustrates the use of appreciative and solution-focused coaching language. Appreciative coaching increases an athlete's awareness of their existing strengths and abilities, and provides a positive starting point for the development of mental skills. Solution-focused coaching principles include:

- . what you focus on grows, so focus on solutions, not problems
- . because athletes are experts in their own lives, they can recognise best solutions for themselves
- . there is always a better way
- . never failure, only feedback
- . all problems have exceptions
- . do more of what works, do less of (or stop) what does not work.

Goal setting

Goal setting is the foundation of all coaching, and the following diagram (adapted from Greene and Grant 2003) provides an illustration of the basic goal-setting process.

Figure 12.1: Goal-setting process



Coaches should first get acquainted with individual athletes and clarify what they want from their sporting experience. Questions that help this process include:

- . What are the best things about your current involvement in sport?

Responses will inform coaches of some of the things athletes really enjoy or value. Understanding the sources of an athlete's interest and energy provides ideas that coaches can craft later to link back to that source.

- . Describe a high point in your sport experience up to now.

Answers will reveal how athletes evaluate both their sport achievements and relationships. Knowing this, coaches can replicate aspects of previous peak experiences in current circumstances.

- . What do you most value from your sports experience?

By exploring values, coaches can create a positive context to frame challenges and issues athletes bring to sport, including how they perceive themselves and their interactions with others.

- . What one or two things do you want more of from sport?

Answers to this question begin to shape a picture of what a possible future may look like for each athlete.

Responses to all four questions accomplish two things. Firstly, they give athletes the opportunity to remember, reflect on and ponder what is important about their sports experience, and what is or has already been positive about that experience. Secondly, by beginning with positive questions coaches immediately move athletes away from 'problem outcomes' and towards creative and 'solution-focused' outcomes in which they become agents of their own change.

Once the goal area has been clarified, coaches can turn athletes to setting INSPIRED goals and developing an action plan. The acronym INSPIRED identifies a number of important goal-setting principles:

- . **I**nternalised — it is important that athletes 'own' and commit to goals. Goals that are accepted and internalised provide a greater sense of self-determination when achieved.
- . **N**urturing — in addition to achieving results or targets, goals should include a developmental and learning element so that athletes grow personally as well as improve their performance.
- . **S**pecific — clear and unambiguous goals make it obvious when they are achieved. Goals do not have to be quantifiable. Such things as concentration and confidence are difficult to attach numbers to, but all goals need to be specific in the sense that certain thoughts and behaviours should be identified.
- . **P**lanned — short and long-term goals lead to greater achievement and higher performance, rather than long-term goals alone. Goals that are time-framed also provide both immediate and long-term incentives, so it is important to build sub-goals into goal-achieving plans.
- . **I**n your control — the achievement of goals should be attainable through the athlete's personal efforts. Effective goals should not be subject to external factors such as financial resources, facility availability and weather, which are uncontrollable.

- . **Reviewed regularly** — regular reviews of progress towards long-term goals and a flexible attitude regarding setbacks and uncontrollable events should be part of the planning process. An image of a staircase with the ultimate goal at the top helps promote a focus on the present, as well as longer-term commitment and persistence.
- . **Energising** — goals should excite and energise athletes as well as produce a great sense of accomplishment when they are achieved.
- . **Documented** — ‘Ink it, don’t just think it!’ Documenting goals in some form and recording progress towards them in effect produces a written contract with oneself. Ideally goals should be constantly visible in a diary or log book, as well as on fridge doors or bedroom walls (adapted from Jones and Moorhouse 2007).

Case study

Barb decided that she would set goals to improve her swimming so that she could win her age group (over 40s) 100-metre breaststroke in the winter carnival in four months time. She knew, of course, that she was not completely in control of this outcome goal in that she had to beat seven other swimmers who were regarded by the coaches as ‘rapid improvers’, and also capable of swimming much faster than their present times. So she set a performance goal that she could totally control — she thought that a time of 1 minute 15 seconds or better would be good enough to win. Subsequently she geared all of her training and practice towards swimming this time and ‘staircased’ her progress in terms of various times and milestones that were required along the four-month journey.

These ‘steps on the staircase’ provided her with a sense of sustained motivation, self-belief and achievement as she monitored her progress towards her ultimate goal. To achieve the performance goal, however, she needed to set underlying process goals such as her reaction to the starting signal, her starting dive technique, her turn, and holding her technique during the last 20 metres of the race, which is when sprinters become fatigued and slow down as they lose their form. In addition to her overall breaststroke technique, these features of her race plan were practised over and over during training. As it turned out, coming into the last few metres of the race in fourth place, Barb finished with technique in tact and passed her three opponents to win narrowly.

When setting goals, coaches can focus on different skill areas. For example, athletes can set goals to improve technical, tactical, physical, mental, behavioural and environmental skills. Technical skills refer to the techniques required to play any sport; tactical skills are those

associated with strategy and decision-making; physical skills relate to improving health and fitness (for example, strength, speed, power, agility and endurance); mental skills include concentration, imagery and confidence; behavioural skills include teamwork, leadership, time management, diet, attitude and enthusiasm; finally, environmental skills relate to sport–work–life balance, personal and spiritual growth, and physical (home) environment.

A key factor in setting goals in any of the above areas is making sure different types of goals are aligned towards the same ends. To ensure this happens, coaches need to teach athletes three types of goals — outcome, performance and process goals:

- . Outcome goals relate to results and usually comparisons of some kind with others (for example, winning a 200-metre race).
- . Performance goals refer to the numbers such as times, distances and points required to achieve the outcomes, independent of other performers (for example, running 200 metres in a specific time).
- . Process goals are the controllable behaviours required to deliver performance goals, such as tactics and strategy, as well as attitude and thinking processes (for example, exploding out the blocks, running the bend hard).

The following table provides an example of aligning outcome goals with performance and process goals.

Table 12.1: Examples of goal types

Goal type	Long jump	Swimming	Football
Outcome goal	Win age-group final	Make swim team	Voted most-improved player
Performance goal	Jump a personal best (for example, six metres)	Reduce times in all strokes by five seconds	Outperform opposition player in 70 per cent of matches
Process goal	Drive arms in run-up High knee lift Reach long in the jump phase	Improve my turns Hold technique when fatigued	Confident and focused under pressure Exploit my vision

Appreciative and solution-focused coaching questions

During discussions on goals, coaches can enhance their athletes' self-management and self-regulation skills using the following types of questions:

- **Goal clarification**

Athlete: 'I want to improve my concentration skills.'

Coach: 'Great, so what does good concentration mean to you?'

- **Dealing with resistance**

Athlete: '... but I couldn't do all that goal-setting stuff!'

Coach: 'Okay, so which bits could you do?'

Athlete: 'I really hate training and practising.'

Coach: 'I hear that. Which parts of training and practising are less unpleasant for you?'

- **Language that moves athletes forward**

Athlete: 'I just don't see the point in continuing. I don't feel I'm getting anywhere.'

Coach: 'So, you'd like a better sense of purpose and direction? What would give you that?'

Arousal and anxiety control skills

Arousal can be described as a general physiological and mental state varying on a continuum from deep sleep to intense excitement. Low arousal is when we are bored or relaxed; high arousal is when we are excited or angry, so a state of high or low arousal is not in itself necessarily a pleasant or unpleasant experience. Anxiety, on the other hand, is by definition an unpleasant sensation. It is often described as a negative emotional state with feelings such as fear, worry and apprehension, and is basically an unpleasant state of high arousal. However, it should be pointed out that fear and anxiety are not all bad in sport. Some apprehension is good to combat complacency. Fearful thoughts or images produce a stress ('fight or flight') response, which is simply nature's way of preparing us to defend ourselves against potential harm and danger. However, the stress response (fear) need not be the end product every time. The term 'intensity' is recommended over both arousal and anxiety because all coaches and athletes recognise that intensity has positive associations with sport performances.

Intensity can range from very low (relaxed, calm) to extremely high (charged, pumped) and can be experienced positively, leading to improved confidence, motivation, stamina and strength, and negatively, leading to extreme nervousness, muscle tension and loss of confidence. It is important that coaches teach athletes how to maintain and control their intensity, because it can dictate how they will perform in training and competition, and how they experience sport in general.

Over-intensity is usually caused by a belief that some upcoming event is stressful, when actually it is the athlete's interpretation of the event, not the event itself, that makes it threatening. Their belief triggers physical (extreme muscle tension, stomach butterflies, shaking muscles, difficulty breathing or excessive perspiration), mental (negative self-talk or narrowed attention) and emotional (fear, anger or frustration) symptoms associated with poor performance. Other causes of over-intensity among athletes include lack of confidence or belief in their ability, and both internal (negative thoughts about past failures and outcomes) and external (expectations of significant others such as parents and friends) distractions.

Under-intensity is also caused by an interaction of how athletes perceive themselves and how they will perform in certain situations. Typical causes include over-confidence (win easily), perceived lack of importance, low motivation (lack of interest) and physical symptoms (fatigue, sleep difficulties).

Case study

Andy is a 20-year-old cross country skier who has developed several approaches to dealing with his stress levels and symptoms. He reads books, does crosswords or listens to music in the lead-up to competition — all internal things to take his mind away from the upcoming game and to a 'different place'. He consciously moves away from nervous people and never hangs out with team-mates and coaches who cannot seem to cope. He picks symptoms in others that give away their stress levels, such as talking too quickly and yelling. When he cannot avoid seeing uptight coaches, he asks to see them at least 90 minutes ahead of the start and insists on making that time the only time they can meet.

Andy still finds the 30 minutes before races the hardest to deal with because everyone seems quite gladiatorial. He is aware of his breathing becoming quicker and his shoulder muscles tensing up. So he has learnt and practised ways of dealing with that (for example, breathing exercises, basic meditative and muscular relaxation techniques, and listening to music). He has also learnt to challenge the 'negative voice' in his head with humour, by imagining two men, one

on either shoulder, and the positive one holding a huge megaphone drowning out the pessimistic and unhelpful suggestions of the other.

Coaches can teach athletes how to identify optimal intensity, which is personal for each athlete, by asking them to reflect on previous successful and unsuccessful experiences, as illustrated in the following table.

Table 12.2: Intensity identification

Indicate the physical, emotional, mental and behavioural responses related to your best (optimal intensity) and worst (over or under intensity) experiences in sport. Discuss these findings with your coach.

Intensity factors	Best performance (optimal intensity). 'Do more of this ...'	Worst performance (over or under intensity). 'Do less of this ...'
Physical feelings		
Emotions		
Thoughts		
Behaviours		

A common issue that arises is how to get athletes to maintain their optimal intensity and stay in the 'zone' when things are going well. Coaches can explain that some athletes snap themselves out of the zone simply because they lose their focus. By thinking 'I'm playing well — why?' or 'I should win' or 'When will I mess up?' the athlete's concentration shifts from the task at hand (for example, the next play) to, respectively, an evaluation of performance, or the expectation to continue it, or the negative consequences if it is not continued. Their focus, which was once on automatic and was absorbed in the moment, moves to a more evaluative one with demands placed on the future. 'Good thinking' in the zone and maintaining optimal intensity is about staying task-aware, enjoying each moment, being patient and trusting performance routines developed at practice.

Appreciative and solution-focused coaching questions

Coaches can use the following questions to discover what causes their athlete pressure and anxiety, and to encourage the athlete to tell about a time when they successfully turned that pressure and anxiety into performance.

- . 'What was the situation? What did you do?'
- . 'How did you feel as you did this?'
- . 'What were the benefits to you and to others?'

Mental imagery

While all athletes imagine themselves performing in their sport — scoring a goal or serving an ace at match point — they may not know how to get the most benefit from using imagery. Mental imagery is a process of internalised (non-physical) rehearsal of an athletic experience involving multi-sensory representations. It can involve sight, sound, touch, movement, smell and taste, as well as emotions, thoughts and actions. The purpose is to reproduce an athlete's experience so accurately that they feel as if they are actually performing. The real value of this mental skill lies in its use of structured imagery scripts, which provide the 'stage' on which the imagery is acted out. Scripts are detailed training and competition scenarios that athletes prepare before imagery begins, and which they use to guide them in the actual settings where performance occurs.

Mental imagery influences sports performance on many levels. It can enhance physical skills (learning new skills, performance execution and error correction), perceptual skills (practising strategy and problem-solving), and mental skills (motivation, confidence, intensity, focus emotions, interpersonal and life skills, and injury rehabilitation). Mental imagery can be used to improve tactical and game skills, such as strategy development, strategy learning, strategy practice and problem-solving. Competition preparation skills, such as familiarisation with competition sites, mental warm-up and pre-performance routines, can also be enhanced through imagery. Imagery can improve coping skills when dealing with pain and injury, rehabilitation from injury, and recovering from heavy training loads. A useful framework for helping coaches maximise the application of mental imagery is termed PETTLEP.

- . **Physical** — athletes should closely mirror the physical movements of their activity, including use of relevant sport equipment.

- . **Environment** — replication of actual performance settings is essential.
- . **Task** — skills that depend on ‘form’ would benefit from an external imagery perspective (seeing oneself as if on television), as opposed to an internal perspective (imagining being inside your own body and experiencing all sensations expected from actual activity), which would be more appropriate for skills involving ‘feel’.
- . **Timing** — real or actual performance time is associated with both enhanced performance and timing of performance.
- . **Learning** — an external perspective may be more useful in early learning where visual perspective is helpful. However, later learning will benefit from an internal perspective emphasising kinesthetic feelings once the athlete has become familiar with the basic skills and movement sensations.
- . **Emotion** — similar emotional reactions as those experienced in actual performance are encouraged.
- . **Perspective** — skills that are more cognitively based (for example, making decisions on club and shot selection in golf or passing options in Australian football) may benefit more from internal imagery, whereas more technically focused skills (for example, tennis serve or dismounts in gymnastics) may profit most from external imagery (Holmes and Collins 2001).

Case study

Mario talked with his coach about his strengths and weaknesses as an under-19 cricketer. He identified that his performance as a fast bowler was often negatively affected by anger. Inaccurate deliveries, no bowling and especially poor umpiring decisions frequently triggered his anger and a loss of focus during games. Mario was also aware that he became more emotional the longer he bowled off his long run-up and when he reached fatigue. So his coach helped him design a refocusing imagery program in which he saw himself dealing with each of the above scenarios in turn.

Several imagery scripts were developed incorporating imagery triggers so he could mentally practise emotional control and refocusing. His emotional control script for dealing with bad umpiring followed: ‘That was an interesting call ... deep breath ... squeeze the ball ... let the anger swell up from my toes to both legs, all the way through my trunk, then flowing down each arm until I feel the hot emotions burst out of my fingers ... squeeze all that anger into the ball as

I return to the top of my mark ... deep breaths ... relax my hands ... pause ... next delivery, see and feel what I have to do to bowl well ... commit to that image ... let's go!

Mario was able to use his imagery scripts to practise emotional control and refocus skills and, although his anger never totally disappeared, he became much more consistent in dealing with these and other negative events during games.

The following table summarises critical moments to use imagery.

Table 12.3: Critical moments to use mental imagery

When	Critical moment	Purpose
Before, during and after practice	Performance rehearsal	To rehearse skill learning and performance
Before competition	Quick preview	To provide relaxing images, repetition of simple and advanced skills, competition strategies, past successes
During competition	<p>Competition preview</p> <p>Instant imagery</p>	<p>To provide an example of actual skill execution, strategies and plays</p> <p>To rehearse action movement and events before they occur</p> <p>To imagine the feeling of a movement or play after successful execution</p> <p>To commit to memory</p> <p>To identify or correct an error</p>
After competition	Competition review	<p>To evaluate good and bad aspects of performance after a competition</p> <p>To assist in planning training</p> <p>To reward good performance</p>

Adapted from Taylor and Wilson 2005

The following table illustrates an example of an imagery script for an axel jump in figure skating.

Table 12.4: Mental imagery script for an axel jump

List basic skill components	Add details (for example, action or mood words)	Refine script using stimulating sentences
Begin by watching a skilled skater (live or on video) perform an axel several times	Close your eyes and put yourself in the skater's body	Imagine what the timing and movements feel like
Exhale and sit into the take-off in a proper take-off position	When setting up the jump, take a deep breath and exhale. Focus on feeling balanced	Imagine the power in the breath and how balanced you feel
Kick a goal! Explode the free leg through as in kicking a ball	As you enter the jump, concentrate on sitting into the entry and exploding on the take-off	Imagine how strong your take off movements are as you kick through and fly upwards
Step up, land backwards. Shift weight to the free leg as if stepping up onto a step and landing on the step backwards	The jump happens quickly so try to re-create the imaged feeling and timing of performing the jump	See and feel yourself turning in the air effortlessly
'Soft and hold'. Landing motion should be soft and the landing position held	On the landing use the triggers 'soft' and 'hold' to achieve the proper landing position	Imagine how lightly and how solidly balanced you land

Adapted from Vealey and Greenleaf 2006

Motivational strategies

Motivation is the driving force behind athlete behaviour and involves the three central components of:

- direction — choosing to participate in particular sports

- . intensity — the amount of effort athletes are willing to expend
- . persistence — continual effort over time, especially in the face of obstacles.

However, what is most important for coaches to learn in terms of explaining athlete behaviour is the basic distinction between external and internal motivation.

External motivation refers to performing for incentives such as money, trophies and to please others. Internal motivation, on the other hand, refers to doing an activity for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself, or simply because you enjoy it. A strong emphasis and focus on participating in sport to attain internal aspirations, such as personal growth and development, is associated with high self-esteem and lower depression and anxiety. Placing a strong emphasis and focus on external aspirations, such as wealth and approval of others, is associated with lower self-esteem and higher depression and anxiety. Most importantly, compared to externally motivated athletes, internally motivated athletes have more interest, excitement and confidence, which in turn leads to greater persistence, energy, creativity and wellbeing, as well as performance.

For internal motivation to be maintained and enhanced it is necessary to satisfy three basic psychological needs that are essential for athlete health and wellbeing:

- . competence — a feeling of mastery and accomplishment
- . autonomy — a sense of being in control so that behaviour and participation in sport is self-determined
- . relatedness — a sense of belonging and security.

Consequently, threats to internal motivation that coaches and athletes need to be aware of include:

- . perceptions of feedback that is negative and indicating a lack of competence
- . overvaluing rewards (for example, trophies and medals) so that they become major drivers for participation
- . being constantly driven by directions and goals imposed by others (for example, parents, coaches)
- . being unable to establish a secure relational base or sense of attachment to others, the team and sport organisation generally.

Coaches therefore need to maintain and enhance internal motivation among athletes by finding ways of helping them feel competent in what they do, providing opportunities for athletes to exercise choice over their behaviour, and facilitating an inclusive, cooperative and supportive sporting environment.

Coaches can also optimise motivation by ensuring that the following characteristics of a positive sport environment are present:

- . Since motivation is about what athletes want to do, not what they are trying to get away from, an approach rather than avoidance culture needs to be promoted.
- . Athletes need to be encouraged to make things happen, not wait for things to happen — be active rather than passive.
- . Athletes satisfying their own needs first before satisfying the needs of others is important — doing things for themselves first, then for others.
- . Motivating experiences are always about enjoyment, not desperation, so events and opportunities need to be positive rather than negative.
- . An internal focus on personal pride, enjoyment, interest and satisfaction derived from achievement is paramount, as opposed to external rewards received by simply being successful. Even where athletes are driven by external rewards they should look to achieve personal choice (autonomy) over their own behaviour as much as possible. This characteristic, self-determination, is also an aspect of effective goal setting.

There are some distractions that sabotage motivation, effort and commitment, and athletes could be made aware of them. They include:

- . Impatience with improvement — probably the number-one form of sabotage. Some athletes want a quick fix, something that works immediately, and if it does not work fast, they are prone to throw it away and not try it again. This is why athletes sometimes jump from one coach to the next looking for the quick fix.
- . Rationalisations that sabotage success — rationalisations are excuses people use to avoid doing something. Athletes sometimes rationalise or justify why they should not go practice, take regular lessons, or work on their mental game. Some golfers, for example, think they will be ready to improve mentally when they are finished working on their swing. When are golfers ever finished working on their swing?

- . Fear of trying and not succeeding — perhaps athletes are afraid of going after their dream and not succeeding. There are no guarantees that if they work harder and put all their energy into getting better, their game will improve. But some athletes cannot stomach the fear of not reaching their goals if they give it their all, so they do not.
- . Distractions by others — do others distract athletes from their mission? Do their friends ask them to party every night? Are others giving them advice that contradicts their coach's advice? If yes, then the athletes should consider a change in input/support network.
- . Overload syndrome — some athletes actually sabotage their commitment to getting better by listening to every instructor and guru, and trying to integrate everything anyone has ever said about their sport. These athletes usually end up more confused, wondering why they are not playing better, and then give up trying.
- . Overtraining syndrome — training too much can also cause athletes to spin their wheels, because they are mentally and physically exhausted and are bothered by nagging injuries. The body needs rest and the mind need a break occasionally.
- . Know-it-all syndrome — if athletes are 'know it alls,' then others, even experts, cannot help them with their commitment. 'Know it alls' are not teachable because they believe they already have the information to be successful.

When dealing with athletes who are negative thinkers, coaches can help them change their self-talk. The goal is to abolish negative, defeatist statements and use more positive, productive ones. Athletes do have a choice in this matter and have control over their self-talk or inner dialogue. Here are a few examples of a golfer's defeatist self-statements and a corresponding productive self-statement:

Defeatist self-talk

'Great front nine, now don't blow it.'

'Play it safe so you don't lose the lead.'

'Don't hook it left out of bounds.'

'He's got me again, I always lose to this guy.'

'I'm never going to break 80.'

Productive self-talk

'Keep this round going strong.'

'Play your game and bury him.'

'My target is over there.'

'Three holes left, I'll recover.'

'I can't wait until I break 80.'

The issue for some coaches is that they coach athletes who are over-motivated. Over-motivated athletes illustrate extremes of effort, determination and work ethic, are too goal-oriented and are perfectionist about performance. Because of this, they can easily become stale and burnt out,

anxious in competition, can over-analyse and try too hard to play well, and because they generally work so hard they can become afraid of failure. Some advice coaches can provide to these athletes includes:

- . stay in the present — focus more on the process of playing the game, not the final score
- . set out to have more fun, not winning/achieving — focus on the joy of just playing sport
- . time out — take breaks in practice/play to refresh and be aware of over-practice syndrome
- . do not dwell on mistakes — perfectionist thinking does not let you enjoy anything
- . give yourself permission to make mistakes — you will never play any game perfectly
- . be patient with yourself (and others) and give improvements time to occur.

Dealing with winning and losing

Coaches can better comprehend how athletes deal with winning and losing by understanding the different ways both coaches and athletes approach and think about achievement situations. For example, consider Archie, a 16-year-old tennis player who has been competing for eight years. He approaches each tournament from the perspective of doing his best, having fun and learning. His focus appears to be on self-improvement and working hard as opposed to defeating opponents. On the other hand, Mary, a 16-year-old gymnast, also with eight years experience, is a highly competitive person and becomes distraught if she does not out-perform her competitors. Winning appears to mean everything to her and she commented recently that as long as she wins she does not care how well she actually performs.

In terms of achievement, Archie would be described as having a **task goal orientation** because he seems more interested in mastery and getting better today at tasks than he was a week ago. Mary could be described as having an **ego goal orientation** because she seems more interested in outperforming others as opposed to self-improvement. Unlike Archie, who perceives himself to be high in ability if he gets better at tasks each day, Mary's perception of ability and self-confidence is tied to how she compares with others. While both athletes enjoy mastering tasks, Mary has become more aware of the consequences of social comparison and has developed a different goal orientation. Consequently, Mary is likely to be inconsolable if she does not win and oblivious to the lessons learnt about personal improvement when she does win.

When athletes fall short, and particularly those with ego-oriented dispositions, coaches should ask questions that help rebuild self-esteem. For example:

- . Did you try your best to achieve your goals or try to stuff up?
- . Was your goal realistic given your preparation, available support, focus and quality of opposition?
- . Was the outcome within or outside your control?
- . Is the outcome now within or outside your control?
- . Are there lessons you can extract from the experience that might help you now or in the future?
- . How best can you act on those lessons?

Coaches can also offer the following advice on finding emotional lifts when athletes feel emotionally down and out:

- . Rest — go to bed early, sleep in, take naps
- . Spend time in silence — silence relaxes
- . Spend time in nature — nature heals
- . Share time with positive-energy people
- . Avoid stressful people and situations
- . Do simple things that you enjoy
- . Reflect on your own recent performance (and others) for forthcoming performances.

In addition, the following three techniques can assist both coaches and athletes to deal with winning and losing, particularly when circumstances seem both unexpected and uncontrollable. The key to these circumstances is to regain composure quickly and to continue with minimal disruption towards desired goals.

Technique 1: What ifs

The 'what if' technique primarily involves identifying those things that could go wrong, although planning for what could go right is also helpful. Coaches and athletes work out responses to each 'what if' before they encounter it. This not negative thinking, it is thinking ahead — these 'what ifs' are going to happen sooner or later. By planning ahead about what they will say to

themselves and how they will behave, athletes effectively remove the heat from the situation and reduce the pressure that can cause over-reactions and rash decision-making. For example:

- . 'What if ... I stuff up and lose today?'
- . I will say to myself 'That's disappointing, but it wasn't all bad. What can I learn from this for next time?' then briefly rehearse/shadow the skills required, congratulate the opponent, smile, and adopt the attitude of 'get over it, move on'.

Technique 2: Simulations

Simulations are simply adverse circumstances built into normal practice conditions that oblige coaches and athletes to practise responses to 'what ifs'. By providing a safe environment to learn and practise constructive and helpful responses to adversity, coaches and athletes become more prepared to deal with the real thing.

Technique 3: Mental rehearsal

Mental rehearsal involves the athlete imagining themselves dealing with errors, mistakes or peak performances. It also helps coaches and athletes re-focus when actual events occur. This technique is especially effective and convenient because it can be practised frequently and uses different types of circumstances.

Appreciative and solution-focused coaching questions

Sometimes unpredictable and uncontrollable adversity occurs and can either demoralise or discourage, or stimulate and challenge. Mentally tough and resilient athletes quickly regain energy and focus after setbacks, and seek out new direction for positive action. Sooner or later all athletes come to realise that setbacks can stimulate learning that sends them into the future even more capable than before. Athletes should think back on a time when they recovered rapidly from a disappointing setback.

- . Who was involved? What happened?
- . What internal and external factors enabled such a rapid recovery?
- . What permanent, positive changes did they experience as a result of this experience?
- . How can they apply what they learnt from that situation?
- . What first steps can they take towards recovery from recent disappointments and setbacks?

Creating a positive environment for team selection

Perhaps even more important than knowing whether an individual athlete is task or ego oriented is the **motivational climate** in which individuals and teams are placed. Learning environments can also be task or ego oriented. An ego-oriented environment, with its emphasis on social comparison, can be particularly harmful to low-ability athletes. Coaches have the choice of creating two types of climates that have significant implications, both on how teams are selected, and the information conveyed by the selection or non-selection.

A task-oriented or **mastery** climate is one where athletes receive positive reinforcement from coaches when they work hard, demonstrate improvement, help others learn through cooperation and believe that each athlete's contribution is important. Team selection acknowledges achievement of all of these values. In contrast, an ego-oriented or **competitive** climate is one where athletes perceive that beating the opposition (winning) is all important, poor performance is punished, only high-ability athletes deserve attention and recognition (for example, selection) and that competition among team members is not only healthy but is encouraged by the coach. Team selection processes merely reflect these expectations.

In the latter environment it would be quite natural for patterns of selection to emerge that reflect self-centred and self-interested approaches to sports participation. However, if coaches are aware of this, they can cater for it and can develop empathy and self-awareness among athletes as well as improve their long-term performance.

All coaches should consider their own principles and processes of selection based around the following key questions:

- . What are the core selection criteria that will promote a positive sports environment characterised by such things as personal satisfaction, strong team identity, team cohesion, mutual acceptance and effective communication? Some suggested criteria might include:
 - effort and commitment — evident in training as well as competition
 - skill development — increasing proficiency in the performance of skills
 - supportive behaviours such as attendance, punctuality and enthusiasm
 - interactions — promotion of positive relationships among team members
- . How can these criteria best be developed to make opportunity for selection as fair and equal as possible?

- . Who else can provide information on selection that athletes would accept as being an appropriate source?
- . Athletes have the right to personal feedback when they are de-selected, so how is this best achieved? Selection should be solely based on agreed criteria and exclude any personal feelings towards individuals.

Rather than treating selection as an uncontrollable issue, coaches should coach athletes to believe that selection is controllable, and help them focus more closely on how they can improve their performances (through process goals), which will enhance their selection potential. If performance is the key criterion for selection, then athletes must assume responsibility for selection. When athletes are de-selected, coaches can suggest that they consider the following:

- . Through self-talk make your setbacks (de-selection) temporary not permanent. 'I was dropped for this game, not the entire season.'
- . Get specific feedback from the selectors about what is required to improve performance. Be assertive but not argumentative, and always thank selectors for their feedback.
- . Focus on the controllables, such as your effort and attitude both to training and games.
- . Prepare responses to (inevitable) questions from others who do not know what else to ask or say to you (for example, 'Why were you dropped?', 'How do you feel about being dropped?').
- . Preserve relationships within the club and organisation. Be nice to everyone and become known for handling setbacks well. Everyone will appreciate that attitude.

Referral services for athletes who need sport psychology advice and support

Sport psychologists can be contacted through the Australian Psychological Society website (www.psychology.org.au) and Australian Psychological Society College of Sport Psychologists website (www.groups.psychology.org.au/csp/). The first point of contact can also be through respective state or territory institutes and academies of sport. In addition to recreational, elite and professional athletes, a range of people use sport psychology services:

- . coaches, managers and administrators
- . trainers, physiotherapists, physicians and others sports scientists

- . umpires, referees and officials, and also performing artists (for example, musicians, dancers, actors)
- . business personnel interested in optimal performance.

The types of athlete assistance sport psychologists typically offer include qualified advice on performance enhancement and individual mental skills such as goal setting, concentration, handling pressure, confidence, imagery, and creating the 'zone' or ideal performance state. Additional personal development skills can be provided, such as exercise and health behaviour changes (for example, weight management and smoking cessation), time-management skills (for example, balancing sport and study or employment or family life), career transitions, communication and travel skills. Issues related to the consequences of sport involvement can also be addressed, such as recovery from heavy training loads, staleness, overtraining and burnout, and rehabilitation from injury. Finally, organisations and teams can also benefit from leadership in conflict resolution, team building, teamwork, debriefing and program evaluation.

Many mental health problems have their first onset in mid to late adolescence or early adulthood — times when participation rates in sport are high. While some athletes may experience one-off episodes of uncontrollable fear, depression or anxiety, or feel that they are 'losing it', these brief periods of distress are not considered symptoms of mental illness. Each mental illness has its own symptoms, but there are some observable behavioural signs that occur over a prolonged period of time (at least two weeks) that might assist coaches in recognising that something is wrong. On witnessing any of the following behavioural signs coaches are advised to consult a sport psychologist who may, in turn, refer the athlete to a doctor and/or to specialists in mental health (for example, clinical psychologist or psychiatrist).

Behavioural sign	Example
Withdrawal	Abnormal disinclination to speak up/get involved
Impaired focus	Inattentive, more easily distracted than usual
Irritability	More sensitive and easily frustrated than normal
Rapid weight change	Extremes of either weight gain or weight loss
Sadness and gloom	Increased tendency to appear very unhappy

Worry and agitation	Abnormally fretful and apprehensive
Aggression	Self-harm or excessively violent towards others
Erratic behaviour	Tendency towards mood swings
Disinterest	Cold, unconcerned, insensible, loss of enthusiasm
Delusional	Deceptive, prone to fantasy and false beliefs
Grandiose behaviour	Over-confidence, arrogance

Summary

Assisting athletes to develop the mental side of their performance is important in the overall development of an athlete. To perform at a competitive level in sport, positive mental skills are an essential component. Some of the areas where coaches can assist athletes include:

- . goal setting
- . arousal and anxiety control
- . mental imagery
- . motivation
- . dealing with winning and losing.

Coaches should also consider how the environment that they create affects team selection processes. In competitive sport, the issue of selection or non-selection can be de-motivating for athletes and affect their ongoing participation and long-term performance. Coaches can assist in setting a positive environment for selection.

Coaches should also be aware of the limits of their role in relation to mental skills. Mental health problems are beyond the scope of the coaches' role, and they should be aware of referral services available for athletes who need specialist help.

References and further reading

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